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## THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF JONAH.

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THAT the book of Jonah has a theology cannot be doubted. One is clearly reflected on the surface, and in the depths, of the story. It is not, indeed, likely that we shall find a full *system* of theology in these short chapters. But if we can find three cardinal points, we can determine the circle. These three points may be most briefly indicated by three words : God, sin, salvation. What has our book to say on these subjects ?

Subsidiary to these three points, we may ask two other questions of a practical sort : What is taught here concerning man's task ? and what of his hope ?

I. What does the book of Jonah teach of God ? He is a person : knowing, feeling, willing, acting. He speaks, reasons, repents. He is holy : loving righteousness, hating wickedness, showing mercy to penitents. He has terrible power : sending a strong wind to stir the great sea into a furious condition, which strikes fear and terror even into the mariners' hearts. He will not be defeated in his purpose. He does what he pleases, and the resources of the world which he has made, including the mysterious depths of the sea, are at his command and under his control. He governs the world *directly* ; no natural laws hinder the free play of his omnipotent will. The storm is the expression of his wrath, which sinks into a great calm when the wrath is overpast. His *creative* energy is limited only by his good pleasure. He prepares a great fish for an emergency. He causes a plant sufficient to cover a booth to grow in a night. He prepares a worm for its destruction. His *dominion* is vast, including the far-away city of Nineveh. Jonah, in his naïve way, will flee from his presence, but soon realizes that his effort is vain. The wings of the morning and the uttermost part of the sea are no help to

him. The right hand held him ; and the hold of the ship could not conceal him. Not only is this God able to find Jonah on the sea, but Jonah finds God there, and finds him as deliverer from his own cowardice and selfishness. The fleeing Jonah becomes ready to lay down his life to save a heathen crew and their passengers. To sum up: the God of the book of Jonah is, on the side of his power, very near to our conception of God. It will be shown later, too, that morally he is most wonderfully kind, and that there is a wideness in his mercy like the wideness of the sea. But now we think especially of his power. Whether he is the only God or not, he is at least the only one worth mentioning. The gods of the mariners cannot help them. The gods of the Assyrians are, at least, ignored. The God who looses the winds from his fists to lash the great sea into a fury, and who controls growth and decay in Assyria, and reads the doom of great Nineveh, can be nothing less than *the* God.

The thought of providence and miracles, stripped of its oriental dress, is in close correspondence with the faith of many scholars today who are scientific as well as devout. Faith knows no second causes, but refers everything immediately to God. It knows God can do all his holy will, and believes the goal of that will is the redemptive purpose for man. Nothing is too small to be included within this divine plan. "There is scarcely a believer who does not know how to tell of God's miraculous guidance in his poor life." Of course, the believer now has, what was unknown in Jonah's day, a conception of the orderliness of nature—of second causes. He grants this intellectual construction of the actual world to the scientific investigator, but his faith refers everything that actually is, natural law and all, immediately to God.

II. What does our book teach of sin? First of all, sin is a tremendous fact. There is no list of sins, or catalogue of broken laws ; but sin stands forth as dreadful in God's sight, and in its dire consequences. Sin rouses the anger and stirs the wrath of God ; at the same time becoming the occasion for the manifestation of his profoundest and tenderest love. Sin moves the

mind that rules the world. It literally shocks the universe. Amos had already suggested that for sin the land would tremble, heave and sink like the Nile, pastures would mourn, and Carmel would wither. It is sin which calls out the mission to Nineveh. No special sins are mentioned. Sin is not in acts, but attitude. The children have lost the child-spirit. They have gone away like prodigal sons from the Father's heart—their wickedness wounds him, but his love abides. The great city lies in rebellion. God's banner is being trailed in the dust. Without amendment there can be but one result—destruction. Sin must be punished; even Nineveh, with innocent children, and poor dumb brutes toiling out their dull lives in service of man, even great Nineveh, with its pride and pomp, must perish if sin is not given up.

But sin in its darkest hues can be seen only in one who stands in brightest light, nearest the throne; in the elder brother, not in the prodigal; in Jonah, not in Nineveh.

"A man said to his son, 'Go work in my vineyard.' He said, 'I will not.'" "The Lord said to Jonah, 'Arise, go to Nineveh.' He arose . . . to flee into Tarshish." He will flee the very presence of the Lord. He will not have this One rule over him. Out of His presence, he says: "Now I can have time to swallow down my spittle; now I shall sleep." But he has not really escaped the Sin-Avenger. "The lot is cast in the lap, but the whole decision thereof is of the Lord." There could be no doubt God had found the sinner. His path was searched out, even in the sea; distance could not save him, darkness could not hide him. The *irrationality* of sin (in Jonah's case) is appreciated by the heathen sailors, who, knowing Jonah's flight, ask in astonishment: "Why hast thou done this?" Their fear of the Lord, their conscientious effort to save human life, their earnest prayer, put Jonah to shame. Jonah's mouth is stopped. His own sin lies at its door. It is not opened till he has answered the "great refusal" with a great surrender. When he loses his life he finds it, and bursts into exultant prayer. He faces God, truth, and duty, and is ready to be offered up to save the lives he has endangered.

But there yet remains the saddest feature of the sin of Jonah. It is true the man who said, "I will not," afterward repented and went. It is true his conviction seemed profound, his conversion genuine, his obedience new and generous—but love, which fulfils all; love, which alone can utterly cover sins, was wanting. The world judges this sin—the sin of not loving—lightly, compared with the sins of the publican and prodigal. It is a matter of deep spiritual interest that we have set before us, the sulking prophet longing for the destruction of the penitent along with his own. We have here the picture of the elder brother. Professor A. B. Bruce calls this sin of not loving the unpardonable sin.

In a word, we find again that our book is wonderfully modern. Its view of sin as dreadful in God's sight, dreadful in its consequences, dreadful in its subtle working, even within God's servant, is worthy of most serious consideration.

III. What does our book teach of salvation? It is a crowning virtue of the book of Jonah that it values man as man. Jonah is first passed through a preliminary discipline in the democracy of the sea. He finds himself reduced to a common denominator with these heathen watermen. They exhibit, not only fear of the gods, but tender regard for men. They have both religion and morals. They are susceptible, too, to new truth, ready to worship the God who made the sea and the dry land. It is impossible for Jonah not to respect the men who row hard to save his life, when he has nearly caused the death of all on board. It cannot be that such men are made only for destruction. If these men can be won to fear the true God, it may be that the great world that lies in wicked rebellion to God may yet be won for him. That Jonah appreciated the full force of his lesson cannot be asserted, but still it must have made a deep impression. That the lesson of equality of men and the universality of the love of God was not learned by the nation is clear. Even in New Testament times Peter requires a new vision for the old lesson that God is no respecter of persons. There were, indeed, in other prophets hopes for the heathen, but the fulfilment of those hopes lay in the future. Then the

gentiles will say : "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob" (Isa. 2 : 2), and "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2 : 4). But here we have the proud Assyrians actually hearing the word of God from a humble prophet, and falling on their knees in forms of greatest self-humiliation and crying to God for pardon.

There is no machinery here, but simplicity and spirituality. As sin is in attitude rather than in act, so is salvation. The Assyrians need not come to the mountain of the house ; they could find God where they were. God was there in Nineveh. Salvation is not of works ; not even is it of worship, ceremonial works in the temple. No temple, no priest, is needed. The only sacrifice needed is the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. "The eternal is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin."

Repentance is the gateway to God and to all that is good. The forms of sackcloth and ashes, and fasting for man and beast, may be appropriate symbols for an inner and spiritual grace, but the essential thing is the turning of the soul from the "evil way" to God.

Two other points remain :

1. Man's task. When Isaiah received his call in the form of a vision of God, there immediately followed a voice, saying : "Whom shall I send ?" This idea of the redeemed life as a life of service reached its fulness in the conception of the Servant of the Lord wrought out in such detail by the great prophet of the exile. Have we not here in the book of Jonah the same idea ? The whole wide world is for God, but now it lies in wickedness. How can it be saved without a preacher ? Is not the election of God, which is the glory of Israel, an election to service as well as to salvation ? Indeed, can it be an election to salvation if it is not at the same time an election to service ? Will not the stagnant water become vile ? If it be granted that God's purpose toward the whole world is salvation, and that the world is susceptible to faith, then man, in so far as

he thinks God's thoughts after him, must see man's salvation as the goal of his purpose also.

2. Man's hope. We may say the book has little that is definite in the way of hope—for it has no eschatology. But it contains two sure foundations of hope. They are the universal love of God and the universal susceptibility of man. Nothing but sin can separate from God. Repentance is return to God. Salvation is not arbitrary, but ethical; no ascent, nor descent, nor pilgrimage, nor exploit—then would salvation be limited externally. But if it only means turning of the heart to a God who is loving far beyond all our thought of him, then man's hope is sure. And God's love does shine through the whole book. Even his wrath is but the obverse side of his love. The wrath is not an end in itself; it is only a means for manifesting love. He, amid the furious storm, is watching over heathen sailors, and his fleeing prophet; in Nineveh, "keeping watch above his own," the king and the slave, the little child and "much cattle." It is true the book breaks off abruptly, not even telling us of the future of Jonah or of Nineveh. But, as Professor George Adam Smith says, "God has vindicated his love to the jealousy of those who thought it was theirs alone. And we are left with this grand vague vision of the immeasurable city, with its multitude of innocent children and cattle, and God's compassion brooding over all." May we not say that the book of Jonah does not end, but breaks off, as it were, in the great scheme of progressive revelation, in the middle of the sentence, "God so loved the world . . . ." (John 3:16).

*Literature on the Book of Jonah:* REBATTU, *De libri Jona sententia theologica* (Jena, 1875); CHEYNE, art. "Jonah" in *Encyclopædia Biblica*, Vol. II; KÖNIG, art. "Jonah" in *Hastings' Bible Dictionary*, Vol. II; KALISCH, *Bible Studies*, Part II, "The Book of Jonah" (1878); O'CONNOR, *Étude sur le livre de Jonas* (Geneva, 1883); WRIGHT, *Biblical Essays*, pp. 34–98 (1886); MARTIN, *The Prophet Jonah* (1891); TRUMBULL, *Jonah in Nineveh* (Philadelphia, 1892); KENNEDY, *On the Book of Jonah* (London, 1895); WOLF, *Die Geschichte d. Proph. Jona, nach einer Karschunischnen Handschrift, herausg. u. erläutert* (Berlin, 1897); also the following commentaries on the Minor Prophets: KEIL-DELITZSCH, HITZIG-STEINER, PUSEY, ORELLI, NOWACK, and G. A. SMITH (in *Expositor's Bible*).